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4-2009

# Never Give Up

Stanley Hickerson  
*Andrews University*

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### Recommended Citation

Hickerson, Stanley, "Never Give Up" (2009). *Lake Union Herald*. 465.  
<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/luh-pubs/465>

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# Never Give Up

THE VISIONARY LIFE OF EDSON WHITE

BY STANLEY HICKERSON

**H**e didn't have an easy life, nor was he an easy child to raise. James Edson White was born to James and Ellen White on July 28, 1849, in Rocky Hill, Connecticut. Twice, as a toddler, little Edson nearly died of illness, and both times he was miraculously healed in answer to prayer.

He had an older brother, Henry, and his younger brother, Willie, was born on August 29, 1854, giving Edson the role of the middle child. Unlike Edson, Willie was blessed with a gentle and compliant nature. The contrast of personalities sometimes precipitated conflict in the home.

Just over a year after Willie's birth, the family moved to Battle Creek, Michigan, and set up housekeeping in a rented cabin. On September 20, 1860, another brother arrived—Herbert—but he lived less than three months. Then just three years later, 11-year-old Edson was unwillingly catapulted into the role of oldest brother by the death of Henry.

Schooling was not a simple matter for the White family. Certainly a great deal of their education happened at home. Edson and Willie likely attended the #3 public school, built just a few blocks from their home. They probably also attended Fletcher Byington's short-lived "church school." But we don't know for sure. We do know that 18-year-old Edson attended grammar classes with Professor Goodloe Harper Bell—we still have some of his papers. We also know that he

took a course in phonography (a kind of shorthand) at Albion College, and had some limited education in bookkeeping. Serving as an apprentice at the offices of the Review and Herald Publishing Association gave Edson a background in typesetting and printing.

But Edson's recurring challenge was focusing on the task at hand. His parents were repeatedly frustrated by his inability to complete the projects he commenced. When he took the hammer outside to repair the fence, the job was begun then the job and the hammer were both forgotten and left to themselves. It seemed sometimes that almost anything could distract Edson's active mind. If only they could convince, cajole, encourage, discipline or otherwise focus that young mind! But it seemed futile. If only Edson could be like his good brother, Willie! And even more concerning to the frustrated parents was the thought that Edson might lead little Willie down the same undisciplined path. Letters to Edson from both Ellen and James are filled with prayers, faith, hope and tough love.



But what Edson lacked in focus, he more than made up for in vision. In letter after letter Edson shares his ethereal dreams with his brother or parents. He almost became a steamboat captain on beautiful Goguac Lake in Battle Creek, proudly wearing a distinguishing uniform. He almost became a teacher with students paying well for his expertise. He almost became a bookkeeper for the Health Reform Institute (the early name of the Battle Creek Sanitarium); and the list could go on. To his parents' dismay, many of Edson's dreams focused on financial success, but none attained it.

In 1870, on his 28th birthday, Edson married Ella McDearmon. His father officiated at the ceremony, and the newlyweds began their new home in Wright, Michigan. In 1872, Edson, along with his younger brother Willie, traveled to Florence Heights, New Jersey, where they both took a six-month course in medicine at Russell T. Trall's well-known Hygeo-Therapeutic College. Both returned with diplomas conferring the degree of M.D., but James White warned them not to attach the title to their names unless they continued to pursue that field.

During the next several years, James White gave Edson responsibilities in various church-related organizations, but he just couldn't seem to keep on task. Too many other exciting prospects danced in his mind night and day.

His parents' frustration began to be shared by other church leaders, and they became less and less inclined to entrust him with responsible positions. Then his father died in 1881.

Edson frequently found himself short of cash, and his family and friends became his creditors. Tensions increased, and by the early 1890s Edson felt alone and abandoned. A failed attempt at business in Chicago, a failed venture to own his own steamboat and sell items up and down the Mississippi River, and personal spiritual decline complicated his life. However, neither God nor his mother ever gave up. Coming back to his old home in Battle Creek in 1893, Edson re-dedicated his life to the Savior and determined to spend the rest of his life in service to God.

Sensing God's call to the South and the extraordinary needs of the Black population, Edson again built a steamboat

and named it the *Morning Star*. Living on next to nothing, he and his wife Emma spent the next several years, with that boat as their headquarters, building and outfitting dozens of schools and churches, preaching the gospel to the poor, and serving as self-appointed spokespersons for God's work in this neglected region. God blessed, and today many faithful Adventists trace their spiritual genealogy to the *Morning Star* and Edson and Emma's tireless efforts.

As is frequently the case, God didn't forget Edson's early dreams. He actually became a ship's captain, a teacher, a writer and an institutional manager. His only unrealized dream—financial security. And although Edson often struggled with that unrealized dream, he grew to learn to trust the One who owns the cattle on a thousand hills, and Edson's example of self-denying work has inspired hundreds of subsequent servants of God.

But the story doesn't end there! Ellen had an unbelievable parental privilege in her last years. When Percy T. Magan and Edward A. Southerland left Emmanuel Missionary College in Berrien Springs, Michigan, and headed south to start a college in Tennessee, Ellen and her son, Edson, served together on the school board, shaping the new look of Christian education for generations of Adventists to come. To our knowledge, the board of Madison College was the only institutional board on

which Ellen ever served. And on it she served with her son, Edson! What greater satisfaction could a parent experience and what greater answer to prayer?

Does your child have difficulty focusing? Does he or she sometimes seem to live in a world of unrealistic dreams? Do tasks go unfinished and chores undone? Someday those dreams may come into focus. Someday the tasks may be completed and the jobs done. Someday you, too, may have the blessed privilege of working side by side with your easily-distracted daughter or son in reshaping the work of God. Faith, hope and tough love combined with lots of prayer may someday pay off. Never give up!

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Stanley Hickerson is adjunct professor of religion and biblical languages on the campus of Andrews University. He is a member of the Board of Adventist Historic Properties.



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